DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 588 SP 035 014

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TITLE Preparing Teachers for the Rural World.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Style; Curriculum Design; *Educational Practices; *Education Courses; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *Rural Urban Differences; *Rural Youth; Secondary School Teachers; Student Characteristics; Teacher Education Programs; Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS *Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

Most educational movements have been in the direction of national standards, have been urban oriented, and often have failed to recognize or acknowledge the uniqueness of rural education. Consequently, rural education has become little more than a second thought as teachers' skills are developed. This paper examines the contribution colleges of education can make to school restructuring by including the unique needs of rural education as a legitimate entity in curricula and pedagogical approaches. Pace and Potterfield (1992) have identified characteristics of rural students in the southeastern section of the United States and have found that: rural learners are likely to be global learners, to have a strong preference for cooperating with others, to see learning as a social experience, to have an aversion to individual recognition, to have difficulty with arbitrarily set time frames, to prefer oral transmission of information in a social setting, to exhibit a tendency toward subjective conclusions, and to have a sense of powerlessness concerning events and the environment. Certain modifications, commensurate with learning styles of rural students, have been made in teacher education coursework offered at the undergraduate, graduate, and inservice levels, that are matched on a one-to-one correspondence with these rural students. It is suggested that these modifications can be made in any undergraduate or graduate course since the emphasis is on classroom climate, social cooperative skills, and teaching strategies. (LL)

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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE RURAL WORLD

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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE RURAL WORLD

INTRODUCTION

While much has been written about multicultural education as it relates to preservice and inservice education and its implementation in public school classrooms, other than among rural educators, little has been written about the differences between rural and urban education. Far too often educational textbooks are written as if education is urban education. Occasionally some modifications and references to and for rural education may be mentioned. While the reform movements of the eighties may have benefited urban schools, they have only added to the problems of the rural schools. Since most movements were in the direction of national standards and were urban oriented, they often failed to recognize or acknowledge the uniqueness of rural education. Seldom was rural education treated as an educational entity with specific needs, but rather as a troublesome area that had to be brought up to the idealistic urban standards (Bloodsworth, 1993). Consequently, rural education has become little more than a second thought as teachers' skills are developed.

PROBLEMS WITH EXISTING PROGRAMS

There are a number of problems with existing programs that might be addressed by the authors of this paper. Among these

rural education problems are: the difficulty in financing physical facilities that the state may mandate as standards are raised; the difficulty in funding salaries of new, appropriately certified teachers required as the result of raised standards and new programs; the lack of respect generally afforded rural education; and the lack of expertise on the part of administrators and curriculum planners as they design instructional programs to meet both the needs of the unique characteristics of rural students and the mandates included in the new and raised standards.

As the urban generated reform movement brings about more standardization and higher standards, the rural schools get caught in a squeeze. The battle becomes simply to survive, rather than to achieve excellence as instructional programs are developed. As new courses are added to the curriculum in order to meet these identified higher standards, all too often the needs and characteristics of rural students are overlooked or are unknown as the courses are developed. Therefore, these authors have chosen to address these oversights. As teacher educators, our realm of knowledge and responsibility empowers us to make our greatest impact upon the construction of appropriate courses which would address the special needs of rural populations (Fitzgerald & Bloodsworth 1993a).

CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATION MAJORS AND OF RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

In our current effort to restructure the educational systems within the nation, serious consideration must be given to rural

education (Fitzgerald & Calliham, 1992). The unique learning characteristics of rural students has not been given proper consideration (Fitzgerald & Bloodsworth, 1993b). Education majors from rural backgrounds are frequently totally unaware of their own learning styles, much less the learning styles of rural public school students they may well teach during their teaching careers. These characteristics are very similar, and in many cases are identical. If rural students are generally unaware of their own unique learning characteristics, then it must be assumed that urban students know even less about rural learning styles.

Learning theory supports the notion that only by internalizing specific concepts do they have meaning. The importance of this notion is that preservice and inservice teachers understand the importance of the characteristics of rural learners. It is through making adaptations in their own course work that they can consequently develop appropriate course work for rural public school students designed to meet their unique characteristics (Bloodsworth & Fitzgerald, 1993a).

Pace and Potterfield (1992) have identified characteristics of rural students in the southeastern section of the United States. Among the notable ones are the characteristics listed below.

Rural learners are:

1. likely to be global learners
2. likely to have a strong preference to cooperate with others
3. likely to see learning as a social experience
4. likely to have an aversion for individual recognition
5. likely to have dificulty with arbitraily set time frames

6. likely to prefer to have information transmitted orally and in a social setting

7. likely to exhibit a tendency toward subjective conclusions

8. likely to have a sense of powerlessness concerning events and the environment

MODIFICATIONS OF COURSE WORK FOR EDUCATION MAJORS FROM RURAL BACKGROUNDS

The following modifications have been made in the course work offered for students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate courses as well as in-service contract courses and workshops (Bloodsworth & Fitzgerald, 1993b). The modifications are matched on a one to one correspondence with the learning characteristics of rural students as listed above.

Global learning. A very detailed syllabus for each course, describing the broad objectives and the conclusiveness of the content and activities is distributed in each course. In addition, the introduction to each class session includes a part that describes the "larger picture" for that session. Continual emphasis is placed on the relationship of concepts in the course being taught to the concepts being addressed in other courses in the program. A summary for each session is included in order to once more emphasize the relationship between components of the activity.

Preference for cooperating with others. Small group work is utilized during regular class sessions. When students are assigned a project, the use of teams is incorporated in the assignment. Oral presentations are regularly employed in the

course work. Emphasis is placed upon the sharing of materials and professional sources.

Aversion for individual recognition. Team work is assessed with a common grade awarded. Any personal recognition, whether oral or written, is done in private. The emphasis is placed upon group recognition.

Perception of learning as a social activity. The interaction between professor and students is done on an informal basis, thus lending a social atmosphere to the class. Humor is frequently used when drawing analogies from the course content. A warm, supportive classroom climate is constantly maintained.

Difficulty with arbitrarily set time frames. The syllabus includes an overall description of the work required and the due dates, thus allowing students to plan their own schedules. Students may work ahead, therefore allowing them to set their own pace. Major quizzes may be rescheduled by the entire class in order to avoid conflict with other course quizzes. Students are encouraged to develop both negotiating and managerial strategies.

Preference for orally transmitted information. Discussion is included in every lesson. A multimedia approach is used in each course. Video tapes, cassette tapes, guest speakers, slide presentations and demonstrations are a few of the examples of this approach. Cooperative group research is shared orally with the remainder of the class members.

Tendency toward subjective conclusions. Students are urged to investigate, gather data, then make decisions based upon knowledge and experience. Concepts are related to students' life experiences. Data related to course information is collected from local news releases to add data based upon real experiences in the students' environment.

Sense of powerlessness. The majority of course requirements are in the students' court, not the professor's. Students have many choices about how to approach, organize, and present assignments. Students may negotiate grades on quizzes. They are encouraged to submit data supporting their position and the grade is adjusted if the data is appropriate. Emphasis is placed upon the learning role of everyone in the classroom, students and professor(s) alike.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR THE MODEL

These modifications can be made in any undergraduate or graduate course, since the emphasis is placed on classroom climate, social cooperative skills, and teaching strategies. Any course content from any discipline can be modified using these suggestions as well as other related modifications which will be triggered by these ideas. Cost is insignificant and any increase in planning time is negligible. Textbooks currently available on the market can be modified by the professor as the content is presented and discussed. These modifications make the model very attractive as we consider time, money, and resources in curriculum planning.

There is also another practical application of the model. Rural learners are not at home in the urban or urban influenced educational environment and do not do well there. That is the reason for the development of this model. But urban students learn equally well using the rural learning techniques model. Addressing rural needs is highly effective for both rural and urban students.

SUMMARY

Colleges of Education are in the enviable position to make major contributions by including the needs of rural education as a legitimate entity in their curriculum and in their teaching of pedagogy. Authors of educational textbooks would do well to make the distinction between rural and urban education. There is a need for the cessation of writing about education only in terms of urban education.

If improvements are to be made in rural education, these improvement must be based on rural education. We cannot improve it by applying urban standards. Rural education is not an after thought. It has only been assigned that role by educators themselves. It is high time that we recognize rural education for what it is -- education that is as legitimate as, but quite different from urban education. States attempting to raise educational standards of rural schools by applying national urban standards and not addressing the unique needs of rural learners and rural schools will only widen the already broad schism. Old problems will be made worse and new problems will be created. And this will be done under the banner of educational reform!

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